



NUMERO XIV Fall / Winter 2019

Special Section

**Bars and Stripes. The United States as penitentiary
Sbarre e strisce. Gli Stati Uniti come penitenziario**

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Photo by Bruce Jackson.

Author's note

When I visited Death Row in Texas in 1979, condemned men almost never got out of their one-man cells. When they played chess or checkers, they'd place the board on the floor, or suspend it by string outside the bars. They could see the board and each other's hand, but they could never look one another in the face. Those suspended boards and reaching hands were, for me, one of the iconic images of that terrible place.



Editors' Note

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“At present new cell buildings, designed to hold 1,600 prisoners, are being constructed at San Quentin. If the present cell-houses and dormitories are allowed to stand the full capacity of San Quentin prison will be 3,500. Add a thousand for Folsom, and we have a provision for 4,500 convicts. Surely, that doesn't solve the problem! There are close to 3000 convicts in California now. Will an additional 1,500 be desirable? It is not new cells that are required, but a new system without cells. No human being has ever benefited by being confined in a cell. God meant human beings for fresh hair, sun and work” (Lowrie 1912, 421).¹

In the last pages of his autobiographical novel published in 1912, Donald Lowrie, anticipating today's debate, posed a central question on what would become the largest carceral metropolis in the world. Today, the phenomenon of mass incarceration is so widely spread, with a population of 2 million and 260 thousand inmates, that the penitentiary is by now occupying a central space in American culture. As described by Doran Larson (in a volume reviewed in this issue), prison has become a “fourth city” after New York, Los Angeles and Chicago.

Lowrie's text, like other classics of prison literature (such as those of Pellico and Dostoevskij), framed a gothic scenario dominated by grotesque and realistic cruelty. This aspect persists in the everyday routine of American jails. And it is precisely because of such an exponentially growing interest in prison, that we decided to dedicate a collection of essays to the subject, in the two-fold attempt to see how far this “fourth city” is extending in US culture, and to provide suggestions to those who operate in prison.

For this reason, it seems worthwhile to stress that Prison studies should not only awaken greater awareness of the problems that affect the carceral system; they must eventually provide suggestions or guidelines for activity within the prison setting. As the inefficient political debate on social media demonstrates, awareness does not necessarily entail an operational effort. The politics of prison also need to be oriented from the outside.

With respect to this premise, following *Iperstoria's* traditional areas of interest in the analysis of literary, artistic and cultural productions, this issue aims at shedding light on the experiential dimension of the prison system in contemporary American society, with reference to earlier times as well. In the attempt to highlight this throbbing humanity, often silenced beneath the experience of imprisonment, we have chosen to open the monographic session with an unpublished photographic contribution by Bruce Jackson on prison farms in Texas. The discussion continues with Roberto Cagliero's introductory essay outlining the literary and critical debate on American penology, a study on prison and photography (Serena Fusco) and an article on Dickens's impression of incarceration after he visited some penitentiaries during his trip to the United States (Diana Archibald). The collection also includes an analysis of American law, poverty and prison policies (Elisabetta Grande), a study on the politics of in/visibility within the surveillance system of American prisons (David Schrag) and an article on confinement and disability (Jennifer Sarrett). The final contributions of this monographic section are an essay on the 1930s classic movie *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (Cinzia Scarpino), a study on Vietnam's imaginary prisons (Stefano Rosso), and two contributions on the well-known TV series *Orange is the New Black* (respectively by Valeria Gennero and Anna Antonia Ferrante). The final texts are the Italian translation of some poems by Jimmy Santiago Baca (together with an interview with the author, a former inmate) and the transcription of a talk by singer and professor Danielle Ponder on the presence and the role of music in prison.

Other significant topics, such as private prisons, could not be discussed in the essays but are analyzed in the review section, which gives an overview of the most recent scholarship in the field of Prison studies. The most obvious shortcomings concern the issue of detention centers for immigrants, now central to the political debate and to humanitarian issues, and those on the psychological conditions of convicts, an emergency extending to an ever-greater dimension in American prisons. We will remedy the omission in future issues.

¹ The full text is available at www.archive.org/details/mylifeinprison00lowruoft. Last visited December 9, 2019.